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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MILAN 000073

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STATE FOR EUR/WE, EUR/PPD

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TAGS: PGOV PREL TBIO MARR MCAP IT

SUBJECT: ITALY: PRIORITIES FOR PROBABLE DEFENSE MINISTER

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Classified By: CG Daniel Weygandt. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Ignazio La Russa is the most likely candidate for Minister of Defense in Berlusconi's government. If given this portfolio, he said he would work to quickly increase MOD's budget, increase Carabinieri police patrols for domestic security, and try to establish military summer camps for Italian youth. He promised to travel to Afghanistan within seven days of taking office to highlight the importance of Italy's mission there. He said the USG no longer needs to worry about its military bases in Italy, and he is eager to work with the USG on a range of issues. He expects a cooperative relationship between the People of Liberty Party and the Northern League in the governing coalition. End summary.

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Priorities for the Defense Ministry  
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¶2. (C) Ignazio La Russa, former National Alliance (AN) politician and current member of Berlusconi's People of Liberty Party (PdL), confirmed to the Consul General he was virtually certain to be named Berlusconi's Minister of Defense as press reports have been speculating. He gave three priorities he will focus on as Minister: increasing the budget for the military, enhancing cooperation between the state police and the Carabinieri (police under MOD control) to enhance domestic security, and opening domestic Italian military bases to youth in the summer to instill a sense of civic pride and participation.

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Bigger Budgets from Berlusconi?  
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¶3. (C) La Russa was clear that Italy must shoulder more of the military burden internationally. He stated his top priority if he were Minister of Defense would be to push for an increased military budget. He would use the additional funds to purchase more arms and to modernize Italy's military services. He was confident that he could secure such an increase from Berlusconi because of his independent political base (as a popular former AN politician in the Milan area) and his personal relationship with him. He insisted that the increase must not only be an increase in monetary terms but also in percentage of GDP. (Comment: It would still be an uphill battle to get any significant budget increase given Italy's sluggish economic growth. End comment.)

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Cleaning up the Streets  
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¶4. (C) La Russa described domestic security as a critical issue for the Italian electorate; however, he characterized it more as a matter of perception than reality (he called Italy's street crime rates among the lowest in the world). He relayed that he had already spoken with Berlusconi's probable choice for Minister of Interior, Roberto Maroni (Northern League-LN), on this issue. He said they agreed to mesh state police (controlled by the Ministry of the Interior) and Carabinieri (controlled by Defense) efforts to increase the visibility of police patrols at night in major cities. La Russa noted he might need to justify the military police patrols as measures to control off-duty Italian servicemen, but that the increased patrols would be a deterrent to crime and cause an immediate change in public perceptions whatever the justification.

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Military Summer Camps  
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¶5. (C) Coming from a generation that served compulsorily in the military, La Russa lauded the spirit of civic responsibility and pride that military service can instill. While he by no means suggests a return to mandatory service, he proposes that domestic military bases in Italy open their doors to young people each summer for thirty day internships.

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He hoped this would promote military service as a career for some, but also a sense of national identity and service to country. He said the program could indirectly serve to combat petty crime and drug use among young people.

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To Afghanistan Within 7 Days  
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¶6. (C) La Russa asked the Consul General on advice for where he should make his first trip as Minister of Defense: Afghanistan or Lebanon. At the Consul General's urging, he promised to visit Afghanistan within seven days of his appointment. He said it is one thing to praise Italian forces in Afghanistan and call for a more productive role, but that visiting the troops there immediately would send an even stronger message.

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No Need to Worry for U.S. Bases  
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¶7. (C) Turning to the military bases in Italy, and especially the base expansion project in Vicenza, La Russa was adamant that the U.S. need not worry with the newly elected government. He did not go into specific details, but it was clear he is well acquainted with, and supports, U.S. military installations in Italy. He literally described himself as pro-American. He related his involvement in the youth wing of the Italian Social Movement (MSI) in the late 1960s as an example of his pro-U.S. sentiment. He said the movement was split into two camps: one pro-Palestinian and the other pro-American (and pro-Israeli). He called himself a leading exponent of the latter.

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Berlusconi's the Boss: Internal Party Politics  
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¶8. (C) La Russa painted a clear picture of the PdL as a party with Berlusconi on top with no second tier leaders. He called this a strength, but also a weakness. He noted that Forza Italia had been an amorphous party with key positions handed out at Berlusconi's whim. La Russa said he would work to organize the PdL into a coherent, stable party. He used the fate of Lombardy Region President Roberto Formigoni as an example of Berlusconi's leadership style. Formigoni has been widely discussed in the press as a possible minister in Berlusconi's government. La Russa noted that PdL leadership met and Berlusconi had decided to have Formigoni continue as regional president rather than become a minister. Still, La Russa said the final decision would be made in a one-on-one meeting between Berlusconi and Formigoni, and that it is, in fact, quite possible to change Berlusconi's mind.

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La Russa: In Love with Politics  
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¶9. (C) La Russa noted that he had been asked to be a Minister in the last Berlusconi government, but that he preferred to serve as the head of the AN parliamentary group. In this way, he was able to work on the full range of government issues rather than being constricted to a certain portfolio. Calling himself ""in love with politics,"" he said he enjoyed his time in the opposition. He noted it was ""extremely gratifying"" to righteously point out the flaws of the government. He jokingly said he would have preferred to remain in the opposition for his entire career instead of being in government. Still, he wanted to be a minister this time around to give a noble end to his political career.

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Justice Minister?  
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¶10. (C) As a lawyer, he called himself perhaps more adapted to serving as Minister of Justice, a role apparently floated by Berlusconi. He blatantly stated that he would not want to be the person between Berlusconi and the magistrates, wryly noting that PdL's rising young female leader Mariastella Gelmini would be more suitable as she would do whatever Berlusconi wanted. (Note: Financial daily Il Sole 24 Ore predicted in its morning edition that Gelmini would likely be

named Minister of Justice. End note.) He mentioned his fascination with the military and his brief military service in the Folgore Regiment (Italian paratroopers) as reasons why he sought the defense portfolio.

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In League with the Northern League  
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¶11. (C) Relations between the PdL and the Northern League will not be a problem, according to La Russa. The two parties collaborated in the last Berlusconi government and had worked together in regional and city governments for over a decade. He compared the rhetoric of the Northern League to excessively loud music at a disco club. If you do not go to clubs regularly, you can barely understand what is going on and can barely hear the music. If you turn down the volume (or are used to the atmosphere), the music is not too bad. Likewise, the party faithful of the Northern League appreciate the harsh rhetoric and policy statements, but if you tone it down a bit, the LN platform is not too far off from that of the PdL. Some disagreements are clear such as LN's original call for secession or an independent foreign policy, but PdL got the LN to back off on those demands years ago. LN's xenophobic rants and proposals remain the primary irritant between the two parties.

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Comment: Ready to Get to Work  
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¶11. (C) La Russa is clearly eager and willing to work with the U.S. on a range of priorities from increased Italian support in Afghanistan to our bases here in Italy. Further, the fact that he already has a list of priorities before being named Minister of Defense gives hope that he will be more proactive and less bureaucratic than his predecessors. While his background and proposal for military youth programs carry a bit of the scent of fascism, he seems convinced that centrist politics are the future for serious political parties.

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Bio Note  
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¶11. (C) La Russa is talkative, energetic and likes to tell jokes to illustrate his points. He has traveled often in the U.S. and calls New York City his favorite vacation spot. He speaks English and German. He is a flamboyant personality and freely admits he enjoys being in the limelight. He is married with three sons.

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